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ABSTRACT

This document focuses on assessment portfolios and examines the advantages and challenges of using an assessment portfolio system inclusive of English language learners as a district-wide assessment tool. Advantages of including English language learners in the assessment program include increased school accountability for all students, a shared vision of student goals and standards, and an authentic picture of student learning. Assessment portfolios that include English language learners really can reflect assessment reforms. Among the drawbacks to the use of portfolio assessments that include English language learners is the fact that reliability is lower than for more traditional assessments, making comparisons more difficult. It is difficult to ensure standardized testing conditions, and the cost of administering portfolio assessments is higher than that of many other forms of assessment. Portfolios also pose a scoring dilemma because of staff development and training requirements and the item required to score portfolios correctly. Developing and implementing a large-scale assessment portfolio that includes English language learners requires extensive planning and discussion and requires considerable resources. Some steps to developing and implementing such a program are outlined. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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Creating Large-Scale Assessment Portfolios That Include English Language Learners

Are Assessment Portfolios That Include English Language Learners Right for Your State or District?

- Are you looking for an assessment system that includes English language learners?
- Do you want to ensure that schools are accountable for ALL students, including students learning English?
- Do you want practitioners to reach a shared vision of student goals, aligned to content standards?
- Are you looking for an assessment system that provides an authentic picture of student learning?
- Do you want to promote improved teaching and student learning?
- Do you want your assessment system to reflect assessment reform?

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Introduction

The current school reform movement has emphasized that the education of all students must be improved. Assessing the achievement of every student is an essential part of school reform, but it is a challenge for most schools, districts, and states (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory & Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Traditional assessment practices of many states and districts have excluded a population of students known as English language learners or limited English proficient students. Consequently, English language learners are often denied access to important educational opportunities that are based upon assessment results.

This document focuses on one type of assessment system, assessment portfolios, and examines the advantages and challenges of using an assessment portfolio system inclusive of English language learners as a district-wide assessment tool. The audience for this document is district-level administrators who are responsible for establishing district-wide assessment programs, as well as state education agency staff who provide technical assistance to districts.

What is an assessment portfolio?

An assessment portfolio is the systematic collection of student work measured against predetermined scoring criteria. These criteria often take the form of scoring guides, rubrics, check lists, or rating scales (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). Portfolios are like a slide show that demonstrates student achievement, rather than the snapshot of student achievement that single-occasion tests provide. Assessment portfolios can include performance-based assessments, such as writing samples that illustrate different genres, solutions to math problems that show problem-solving ability, lab reports demonstrating an understanding of a scientific approach, or social studies research reports demonstrating the ability to use multiple sources. In addition, district-wide assessment portfolios can include scores on commercially-developed, nationally norm-referenced tests, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) or the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), or results of state assessment measures such as the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), and other information pertaining to students' educational background. ■

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What are the advantages of assessment portfolio systems for English language learners?

Inclusion of English language learners

Unlike other assessment programs, assessment portfolios do not exclude certain student populations from participation. A major problem with commercially-developed, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced testing programs is that English language learners are often excluded from these tests because of their lack of proficiency in English. Many states have policies that restrict English language learners from taking these exams for one to three years after their arrival in a U.S. school system, or until a certain level of proficiency is reached (Special Issues Analysis Center, 1995). These same tests act as gatekeepers to some educational opportunities, such as programs for gifted and talented students, magnet school participation, and even Title I services. As a result, exclusion from the system-wide testing program deprives English language learners from access to important educational opportunities that are based upon the results. In contrast, assessment portfolio systems include samples of student work that are collected and scored according to predetermined criteria. Therefore, all students, including English language learners, can be included in the assessment system.

English language learners are included in the assessment programs of two states (Vermont and Kentucky) that use assessment portfolios. In Vermont, the Portfolio-Based Writing Assessment Program was developed to measure how well Vermont schools teach students to write across the curriculum, and to "provide a high common standard of achievement for all students" (Koretz, Stecher, & Diebert, 1992, p. 2). Similarly, the Kentucky writing and mathematics portfolios are integral parts of the Kentucky Instruction Results Information System (KIRIS). The writing and math portfolios are collections of students' best work, selected from particular classroom activities, which Kentucky teachers score using scoring guides for writing and mathematics along with benchmarks of student work (Rigney, S., personal communication, January 3, 1997). Admittedly, the number of English language learners in these states is small, and information pertaining to these students is not disaggregated. However, in both of these assessment portfolio programs, *all* students in the schools that participate, including English language learners, are assessed. Thus, the schools are held accountable for *every* student who is assessed.

Increased school accountability for all students

At the state and district level, assessment information is often collected to ensure that the educational system addresses the needs of all of its learners. Inclusion of English language learners in state or district-wide testing programs is critical for accountability and to produce accurate data reflecting their achievement (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1994). By providing systems with a richer source of information about student learning, assessment portfolios can help school systems identify and meet the needs of diverse students, including English language learners.

Large-scale assessment portfolio programs assess specific abilities or achievement levels according to criteria that have been agreed upon by teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders within the system. Thus, expectations are clearly defined and can be disseminated to all stakeholders, including students, teachers, and parents. The results are used to evaluate school and district services.

Assessment portfolios can increase accountability for the education of English language learners because portfolios contain at least some information upon which to base educational decisions, even if one item of the portfolio is missing from an English language learner's file (e.g., the score from a norm-referenced test). If the results show

that English language learners as a group are not doing well, this information can be used over time to guide districts and states to align resources to improve English language learners' achievement.

Because traditional testing policies that utilize commercially-developed, norm-referenced or criterion-referenced tests often exempt English language learners from taking these tests during their initial years in U.S. educational systems, many schools have not been held accountable for the achievement of a large majority of English language learners in these important years (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1994).

A shared vision of student goals and standards

Developing an assessment portfolio system that includes English language learners helps teachers, administrators, parents, and students shape a common vision of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their course work. The process also requires that English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual program teachers participate in the discussion, improving the chances that the assessment tasks will reflect important issues in second language acquisition. For example, when assessing content knowledge, teachers must look beyond language errors and focus on how well students demonstrate an understanding of the content concepts. By clearly articulating expectations and the criteria upon which to assess attainment of these expectations, school systems help create a shared vision of the purpose of education based on the values of the community.

In addition, when stakeholders work together to develop shared goals, they can address the needs of English language learners. Language and content standards can be represented in both ESL and content area curricula. These goals may be directly linked to state content and performance standards. Drawing from this vision, school systems can identify, select, and/or create assessments that represent the educational goals they hold for their students. Scoring criteria can then be established, and benchmarks of varying achievement levels can be provided to collect information on student attainment of the standards. As a result of the standards-based reform movement, a number of states and districts have revised their curricula. As yet, few districts have used content standards appropriately for English language learners and measured attainment of the standards with valid and reliable assessments. In San Diego, California, the Literacy Assessment Portfolio piloted in the 1996-97 school year measured the progress of students in a program that has aligned San Diego's English language development program to the district's English language arts standards. The reading portion of the assessment portfolio system was fully implemented in the 1997-98 school year and assesses all students district-wide in grades K–12, including those who speak a first language other than English. Portfolios at grades 3, 4, and 8 are scored centrally, with scores on the reading exhibit reported as part of the district's accountability plan.

San Diego is one of the first districts in the United States to assess all students using an assessment portfolio system that includes English language learners and is premised upon a shared vision of standards-based education (Burns, G., personal communication, May 12, 1997). When used as part of a multi-phased assessment program, assessment portfolios can also be used in the formative evaluation process as state and district staff implement standards-based curricular reforms.

An authentic picture of student learning

Assessment portfolios can be designed to measure virtually any observable skill or process, or content-area knowledge, needed for system-wide assessment purposes. In fact, a wide range of student products can be included in assessment portfolios and used to assess student learning and achievement, as long as predetermined scoring criteria are in place (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996). As noted earlier, portfolios provide educators with an ongoing demonstration of student achievement.

Developing an assessment portfolio system that includes English language learners helps teachers, administrators, parents, and students shape a common vision of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their course work.

Assessment portfolios are one of the few assessment procedures that accommodate learners' specific needs (Ancess & Darling-Hammond, 1994). Portfolios are designed to be inclusive and contain an authentic description of what students can do. Even English language learners at the beginning level of English proficiency can be asked to write a story and then judged according to scoring criteria. Likewise, students with limited English proficiency can perform math or science activities.

Proper accommodations, such as extending time or allowing the use of dictionaries, can create an environment in which English language learners maximize their opportunity to demonstrate knowledge. Because assessment portfolios usually contain complete products, educators recognize that portfolios are valid representations of student learning. For this reason, several school districts across the country have implemented district-wide assessment portfolios for their English language learners, including San Diego; Arlington County, Fairfax County, and Prince William County in Virginia.

Improved teaching and student learning

Using assessment portfolios that include English language learners not only provides improved information about student achievement, but also makes a positive impact on teaching and student learning. In Vermont schools that have elected to participate in the statewide writing

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When teachers are trained to use and score portfolios based on agreed-upon criteria, they tend to move toward a more learner-centered teaching model, which encourages students to take more responsibility for their own learning.

assessment (92% of all public schools), all teachers at the 5th and 8th grade levels have been involved in staff development on the use of writing portfolios, and many have been trained intensively to improve inter-rater reliability among scorers.

While the training has been a major staff development effort, Geof Hewitt, a writing assessment consultant for the state, noted the program not only provides state officials with a richer understanding of how well students write, but has the added effect of improving teaching and learning based on the feedback that portfolios provide to teachers and students (Hewitt, G., personal communication, October 11, 1996). In fact, after studying Vermont's portfolio assessment program, researchers from the RAND Corporation concluded that the effects of assessment portfolios on instruction were "substantial and positive" (Koretz, Stecher, & Diebert, 1992).

Likewise, an evaluation of Kentucky's portfolio assessment program conducted by Western Michigan University found that students in Kentucky were writing more and doing more group work as a result of the new state testing program. Teachers and other stakeholders reported "almost unanimously" that student writing had improved in Kentucky (Baker, 1996).

When teachers are trained to use and score portfolios based on agreed-upon criteria, they tend to move toward a more learner-centered teaching model, which encourages students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Through training, teachers develop an understanding of the quality of student work that meets specific achievement levels, according to the scoring criteria. During training sessions, teachers go through the process of judging portfolio samples and scoring them according to the criteria defined in the scoring rubric. While doing this, they often clarify what objectives the instructional program is designed to meet. In turn, teachers often modify their own teaching to provide students with a better understanding of those same instructional objectives. The process of developing, implementing, and scoring portfolios takes a concerted effort, and requires a truly precious commodity – time. Yet the training effort results in a more learner-centered classroom.

Thus, while scoring portfolios is a time-intensive task, it is time well-spent. Assessment portfolios provide states and districts with a better understanding of student ability and achievement and allow both students and teachers to evaluate work with a common vision of excellence. The teacher training that is necessary to implement assessment portfolios also prepares teachers to teach to an increasingly diverse student population, and, more importantly, leads to improved student achievement.

It is critical, however, to provide quality staff development programs that include a discussion of second language acquisition and its impact on learning, so school systems can implement an assessment portfolio program with all students, including English language learners. Improved teaching results from such staff development that prepares teachers to use and score portfolios equitably.

Assessment portfolios reflect assessment reform

Advocates of assessment reform call for new measures that provide a better understanding of student achievement, especially for English language learners. In a report entitled *Quality Counts: A Report on the Condition of Public Education in the 50 States*, Education Week and the Pew Charitable Trusts define crucial data that states do not currently collect that would help states assess their educational systems (Wolk, 1997). Some of the uncollected data include: whether states' standards set rigorous expectations; whether states' assessments adequately measure student achievement of the standards; whether states' exit exams are linked to core content standards; whether states have explicit performance standards that include samples of student work; the percentage of the student population excluded from the assessments; and the percentage of teachers participating in professional development grounded in new content standards. By using assessment portfolios inclusive of English language learners, states would acquire information related to several of these data points.

When educators think about implementing assessment portfolios, they often initiate a concerted discussion about achievement expectations in a state or district. Assessment portfolios that are the result of such discussions can be directly connected to content standards in the system. By implementing assessment portfolios that include English language learners, school systems could reduce the number of students excluded from the system-wide assessment program and possibly increase the number of teachers participating in professional development activities.

Finally, assessment portfolios can also be administered in a similar way to the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), an integral piece of assessment reform. The NAEP, considered to be one of the best-designed assessments used nationally, has recently begun to make accommodations to include more English language learners in their national sample. Accommodations for students who speak a language other than English, such as translated directions, dual language or translated test booklets, extended time periods, and small group administration, have all been recommended or are under consideration by NAEP (Olsen, 1996). Similar modifications can be employed in district-wide assessment portfolio systems that include English language learners, either to the text of portfolio entries, or to the testing procedures (Butler & Stevens, 1997). ■

What are the challenges of assessment portfolios that include English language learners?

Lower reliability and comparability

Assessment portfolios are not without challenges as a system-wide assessment tool. First, state education agencies report that there is a general public resistance to more performance-based testing because it is perceived to diminish the accountability of schools and districts (Special Issues Analysis Center, 1995). The public has become accustomed to single scores, such as those used to describe the results of standardized, norm-referenced tests, like the CTBS. Single scores are comparable across systems, and from one year to the next. However, many performance-based tests, including some portfolio systems, do not easily or meaningfully translate into a single score, or set of scores, that can be readily compared. Because some districts report the results of performance-based tests in words, rather than with a numerical score, stakeholders sometimes feel the school system is less accountable for individual students.

Furthermore, it is difficult to implement assessment portfolios that meet the reliability requirements many school systems want. Achieving a certain degree of reliability among raters or test evaluators (for example, .7 agreement or better) is important, according to researchers at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (Novak, Herman, & Gearhart, 1996). Without achieving high inter-rater agreement figures, the usefulness of the scores as an accountability tool diminish because the results cannot be used to compare scores reliably between schools within the system, or over time.

Contrary to public perceptions, however, standardized testing conditions can be implemented for specific contents of assessment portfolios, such as a writing prompt.

However, assessment portfolios can be designed with the single score requirement in mind. For example, Vermont's inter-rater agreement figures on the writing portfolios actually improved when they averaged scores on five writing subsections into a single score (Koretz, McCaffrey, Klein, Bell, & Stecher, 1993). On the other hand, if the results of assessment portfolios are translated into numerical scores, the benefit of richer information about student learning is lost. Therefore, it is recommended that both results be retained.

Difficulty ensuring standardized testing conditions

Some states and districts are prevented from implementing performance-based assessment programs that include assessment portfolios by state legislatures mandating the use of traditional norm-referenced tests. One reason state legislatures mandate these tests is due to the perceived importance of standardized testing procedures that require all students to perform under similar circumstances (Special Issues Analysis Center, 1995). When using assessment portfolios, performance conditions may vary and teacher bias can affect students' performance. For example, the variability in the amount of support teachers provide to students, the amount of time students are allowed to spend on portfolio samples, and the extent to which student work is augmented by support from external sources (e.g., peers, parents, tutors) has raised questions concerning the validity of inferences about student competence based on portfolio work (Gearhart, Herman, Baker, & Whittaker, 1993).

Contrary to public perceptions, however, standardized testing conditions can be implemented for specific contents of assessment portfolios, such as a writing prompt. In Vermont, for example, the statewide writing prompt is administered to all students in grades 4 and 8 at the same time across the system. To ensure standardization, educators at grades 4 and 8 receive staff development to learn which testing accommodations are permissible and which are not.

When English language learners are included in a portfolio system, the scoring criteria must be designed to assess content knowledge and language proficiency.

Cost

One hurdle in developing an assessment portfolio system is the ongoing cost of the program. According to a RAND Corporation report on the cost of science performance assessments in large-scale testing programs, the cost of performance tests is three to ten times more expensive than multiple-choice tests (Stecher & Klein, 1997). However, science may be the most expensive content area for which to develop performance tasks because of the use of manipulatives (objects that students use to explore, apply, and connect different concepts and skills).

Designing, implementing, and scoring portfolio items is labor intensive, and therefore costly. Practitioners invest a substantial time commitment to align the assessment tasks with the curriculum, and to develop the scoring criteria and the scoring tools. Costs accrue throughout the development phase and into the implementation phase for both portfolio assessment and standardized tests. In fact, the only cost incurred by assessment portfolios that are not also incurred by standardized tests is that of scoring the portfolio samples.

State legislatures and school boards may inaccurately believe that standardized tests are less costly to design, administer, and score. When a school system purchases a contract with a commercial testing company, and a one-time cost is incurred, this may be true. However, many states and districts now purchase tailor-made tests, the design and implementation of which are quite costly (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1994). Still, persuading state legislatures

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and school boards to agree to the additional costs involved in scoring an assessment portfolio system that includes English language learners can be difficult.

Scoring

Portfolios pose a difficult scoring dilemma for three reasons. First, developing and using scoring criteria requires labor-intensive staff discussion and training. When English language learners are included in a portfolio system, the scoring criteria must be designed to assess content knowledge and language proficiency. As the scoring criteria are developed, educators must keep second language acquisition principles in mind to ensure that the assessment criteria are valid and reliable for all students, including English language learners. Both content and form should be considered when applying the scoring criteria for assessment portfolios that include English language learners. To accommodate the needs of English language learners, additional weight can be given to content knowledge, as has been done in Virginia's statewide writing test (O'Malley, M. personal communication, October 21, 1997).

School staff throughout the system agree on the outcomes being sought and the criteria being used to measure student performance, enabling stakeholders in a district to share a common goal.

Second, developing inter-rater agreement among teachers and other scorers requires intensive staff development. The staff development consists of providing educators the opportunity to practice scoring student samples in order to improve inter-rater agreement, as well as intensive staff discussion about the goals and objectives of the instructional program. Third, the process of scoring student work using predetermined scoring criteria is more time-consuming than the process of scoring a single-occasion, norm-referenced test.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, a district-wide portfolio assessment system is used to assess and monitor the progress of all English language learners. ESL teachers in Fairfax have received extensive staff development on the use and scoring of the portfolio samples. In most cases, teams of scorers, who have received intensive training to improve inter-rater reliability figures, score writing samples based upon predetermined criteria. A subset of the portfolios is usually assessed by more than one scorer.

Fortunately, as mentioned earlier, the staff development efforts needed to train teachers to use portfolios and to develop inter-rater reliability have an unexpected benefit. They result in teachers who share a common vision of what student achievement in the particular subject looks like. Teachers decide together what benchmarks to use for assessing student work. School staff throughout the system agree on the outcomes being sought and the criteria being used to measure student performance, enabling stakeholders in a district to share a common goal. Most norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests cannot achieve this result. ■

Conclusion

Developing and implementing a large-scale assessment portfolio program that includes English language learners requires extensive planning and discussion and considerable resources. Many states and local districts have begun to use some performance assessments that require scoring with a rubric. A number of the perceived challenges of assessment portfolios (e.g., issues of reliability and comparability, ensuring standardized testing conditions, and the costs associated with developing, implementing, and scoring assessments based on content-area standards) also apply to other large-scale performance assessment measures that are scored with predetermined scoring criteria.

To date, only Vermont and Kentucky use statewide portfolio assessment systems. Neither of these states have high proportions of English language learners; nor do they disaggregate the data for English language learners included in their assessment. District-wide assessment portfolios that include English language learners have begun to emerge but are not yet widespread. From these experiences, the advantages and challenges of assessment portfolios that include English language learners have been highlighted.

The advantages are that stakeholders within the system have a common vision regarding what students should learn and be able to do, how goals will be assessed, and what criteria will be used. Improved teaching and learning are natural outcomes of a well-designed, well-implemented assessment portfolio system that includes professional development. Once a school system has decided to move forward with assessment portfolios that include English language learners, the lessons learned from the efforts of statewide portfolio systems, such as Vermont and Kentucky, and from emerging district-wide systems, such as San Diego and Fairfax County are invaluable. These voices from the field collectively recommend considering the steps described on the following page when designing a successful portfolio assessment system that includes English language learners. ■

Steps to developing and implementing an assessment portfolio system that includes English language learners

- **DECIDE ABOUT GOALS AND CONTENT**: Stakeholders within the school and district, including those responsible for English language learners, decide what assessment information is needed and how that information can be provided. A group of teachers agree to lead the development of the portfolio program.
- **DESIGN THE PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT PROGRAM**: The lead group of teachers, including ESL and bilingual education teachers, administrators, and parents decide on the range of products to be included in the portfolio assessment program.
- **DEVELOP SCORING CRITERIA AND STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE**: The group decides upon common goals for student learning and performance and how they will be assessed, develops scoring rubrics and checklists, and agrees upon standards of performance to be attained. If possible, benchmarks that exemplify student work should be articulated, including benchmarks for English language learners.
- **ALIGN TASKS TO STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM**: The group aligns the assessment tasks to the district or state content standards and curriculum frameworks.
- **IMPLEMENT AT PILOT SITES, PROVIDE STAFF DEVELOPMENT, AND ANALYZE RESULTS**: Decide on pilot sites/classrooms and provide staff development on the implementation of portfolios. Following the implementation at pilot sites for at least one full school year, score the portfolios from the pilot sites. The effectiveness of the program should be assessed and the scoring criteria modified, based on the feedback of pilot site educators and the results of the scored portfolios. Study the effects of the portfolio assessment program on English language learners in particular, to determine whether improved information about these students is available as a result of portfolio implementation.
- **IMPLEMENT AT ALL SITES**: Once the program has been piloted and found to be effective, implement the portfolio program at all sites.
- **TRAIN TEACHERS TO SCORE**: School or district staff oversee the training of a team of teachers who practice scoring student work using the portfolio program's scoring criteria and benchmarks. Training should include discussion of second language proficiency and its impact on student achievement. Efforts are made to reach an inter-rater reliability level of .7 – .8.
- **ESTABLISH GUIDELINES FOR ADMINISTRATION**: Stakeholders develop guidelines for a standardized collection of student work and decide the time, place, and manner in which standardized prompts will be given to assess students throughout the system. Accommodations for English language learners are delineated.
- **SCORE THE PORTFOLIOS**: Teachers score the portfolios based upon predetermined criteria. This typically is done over several days in a central location by teachers who have been trained.
- **REPORT THE RESULTS**: All stakeholders receive information about the results of the portfolio assessment in a timely fashion, in ways that make the results meaningful to all, including teachers, students, parents, and other community members.
- **EVALUATE THE PROGRAM**: After one year, evaluate the effectiveness of the portfolio program and make necessary judgments.

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